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# Xavier University's focus on sustainability impacts students, environment

Sharon Abercrombie | Sep. 27, 2012 Eco Catholic

*Author's note: This is the second story highlighting two Midwestern Catholic schools and their ongoing immersion in sustainability. On Sept. 18,Eco Catholic featured Lewis University[1], a De La Salle Christian Brothers school near Chicago. Today's column focuses on Xavier in Cincinnati, the sixth-oldest Catholic university in the country.*

When he first enrolled at Xavier University in 2008, Gerardo Patron-Cano anticipated becoming a successful businessman like his dad, moving across the globe for international work assignments in such exciting places as Beijing and Brussels.

It didn't happen. Four years later, the 22-year-old graduate is now growing radishes, turnips, oats and tomatoes as an intern at Turner Farm, a working organic farm outside of Cincinnati.

"It's been an amazing time," he said. "I can't believe this is a job because of how awesome it is. And I know that what I'm doing is ecologically sustainable."

Patron-Cano's career plan flipped on its head after he signed up for one of Kathleen Smythe's history classes. It was an eye-opener. For the first time, he learned about "globalization and neoliberal policies as causes for the grave injustices in the world."

"I was so ignorant," he said. "I had previously looked at the world in terms of demand and structural problems of social justice."

The class affected him deeply, providing an alternative micro-lens perspective of the ruinous effects of agribusiness practices.

"I became aware that most food comes from over mechanized highly impersonal growing processes," Patron-Cano said.

It caused Patron-Cano to rethink his major. He switched from business to the school of liberal arts with a major in economics, and he now dreams "of having my office hours as a professor being divided between my desk and

my plot of land. I want students to come to me to talk and farm and have a good time."

His story is one glimpse into the world of Xavier University, where every student participates in experiential learning components related to sustainability before they graduate. Patron-Cano's experience went further: He signed up for one of Smythe's academic learning semesters in Ghana. When the group returned to Cincinnati, she reoriented them to the U.S. by organizing a day trip to Turner Farm, where "we did a couple of hours' work and talked about localization as an antidote to globalization," Patron-Cano said.

Farming duties as part of a history class might seem out of place, but it's been mostly successful, Smythe said.

"Students are open to new experiences, and they generally find the work rewarding in ways that they are not accustomed to -- an immediate sense of satisfaction in a row weeded or lettuce harvested that tastes sweet, for example," she said.

Xavier students meet sustainability through other courses as well. Elizabeth Groppe's theology and ecology class explores the biblical and theological foundations of care for creation, and "from this perspective we study climate change, the biodiversity crisis and agriculture issues." (In December, *America* magazine published her article on climate change [2].)

Like Smythe, Groppe sends students into the community for hands-on work with sustainable groups. Some go to Green Umbrella [3], an initiative to turn Cincinnati into a sustainable city. Others help out on farms, urban gardens, the campus' own NEXUS community garden, or in local green businesses.

Groppe said some students coming to her class from Catholic high schools or parishes are already familiar with the need for creation care. For others, the alarming state of the planet comes as a shock.

"They totally resonate with Elizabeth Johnson's article 'Losing and Finding Creation' that explains how creation has been lost in much of Christian spirituality and practice over the course of the past 500 years," she said.

Groppe told Eco Catholic that in spite of the information age, many students are still clueless regarding the realities of mountaintop removal coal mining; the terrible extinction of species that is going on right now; toxins in the environment; soil erosion; and the scope and projected consequences of climate change.

Once they learn the facts, however, students start asking questions. Last week, after Groppe's class read Richard Miller's article on climate change in his anthology, *God, Creation and Climate Change: A Catholic Response to the Environmental Crisis*, one student asked, "Why doesn't Obama draft legislation to address this and take it to Congress, where it should be signed immediately into law?"

Groppe said, "Why is the wisdom in this action that is so apparent to this young man not evident to all of us?"

Sustainability consciousness does not stay in the classroom. It pervades the entire campus. The concept received a boost in 2008 when the university's president, Jesuit Fr. Michael J. Graham, signed the school's name to The American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment to become climate-neutral. More than 650 college and university presidents have signed on to the agreement.

After signing the commitment, Graham created a sustainability committee, which represents a cross-section of the campus community, including faculty, students and staff. It is working to reduce energy use and transportation costs; increase green space; conserve water and use organic materials; and make purchasing and maintenance practices more sustainable. The target date for becoming completely climate-neutral is 2030.

Currently, here is a campus update on what is happening. Construction-wise, Xavier recently completed the last

of the buildings in its new Hoff Academic Quad. The quad consists of the Conation Commons, Smith Hall and the Central Utility Plant. The three buildings were designed to meet or exceed the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED silver standards.

Since the quad opened, energy consumption has decreased by 17.5 percent, the website notes. A green roof increases sustainability. Carpets, paint and other low-VOC materials are improving indoor conditions and helping the natural environment. The buildings boast reflective white roofs, which prevent 80 percent of sunlight from heating the city air and atmosphere. This directly reduces the earth's temperatures and reduces energy consumption from heating and cooling buildings.

In the words of John Buchanan, director of The Edward B. Brueggeman Center for Dialogue, these climate-friendly buildings serve "as teachers, too, not just places within where we teach."

Students are likewise teaching and getting the word out to their peers about creation care. Xavier's four student sustainability interns are active in prompting environmental consciousnesses in every place their contemporaries live. An extensive guide to a Green Cincinnati has tips on how to live green both on- or off-campus. The guide includes seemingly mundane things like turning off dripping water taps -- not doing so wastes about 2,700 gallons of water each year. The booklet, which appears on the school website, points out that showering just a minute less each day can save 700 gallons of water a month.

It encourages students to ride bikes on campus or take campus shuttles; to fill their reusable water bottles at refill stations; and to observe Meatless Mondays.

The guide talks about Xavier's food service operation, which is providing plastic Green-To-Go boxes instead of Styrofoam. Ann Dougherty, campus sustainability coordinator, says they can go through the dishwasher at the cafeteria and make takeout waste-free.

"We keep them in our dorm room or office, bring them back to eat in or get a clean box the next day. During summer, when school is not in session, the food service caters conference takeout meals for hundreds at a time using these boxes, and they save so much waste."

Another way the campus saves on waste is to promote sustainable projects, such as reorganizing dorm move-outs at the end of the year so furniture, clothes and food go to local charities. The temptation to just toss stuff is not there because the organizations send moving trucks to haul it all away, where it will do some good.

Finally, Dougherty points to the Xavier sustainability website [4], under the label "What Can I Do?" The site includes essays from faculty and staff regarding their own creation care practices. Smythe's piece on "Living Glocally" [5] can be accessed there.

In an email, Smythe wrote she believes sustainability will not endure for the long haul unless it includes a spiritual component.

"Without attention to our spirits, sustainability education will not be successful. Why? Because if we and our students do not appreciate and love what we know and have, we will not have the emotional and spiritual reservoir to carry us through the work ahead.

"As a professor who has been in the classroom at Xavier for fifteen years, I can say from my heart and my head that a sense of wonder, of seeing God in all things is what we need to be emphasizing."

On a final note, Xavier's campus is preparing for its fourth annual Sustainability Week. The event will celebrate the 50th anniversary of "The Prophetic Vision of Rachel Carson," author of *The Silent Spring*. It began

Wednesday with a showing of Sandra Steingraber's film, "Living Downstream." Steingraber, who has a doctorate in biology and is a cancer survivor, is an internationally recognized authority on the environmental links to cancer and human health.

Other activities include a community action day on Saturday, a one-woman performance piece by Kauilani Lee about Rachel Carson's life on Oct. 4, and an address by Steingraber on Oct. 7.

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